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ABSTRACT

Literature circles generally involve four or five students who are actively engaged in cooperative learning. Learners choose a library book to read based on interest. The same titled paperback might be discussed by participants in the literature circle. Alternative suggestions for literature circles include choosing a library book on a similar topic but written on different levels of complexity or choosing a different selection by the same author. The teacher may choose one circle member to lead the discussion or leadership may emerge within the group with no designated chairperson. Discussion can center on type or kind of major character, geographical setting of the story and how it affected the major character, theme and plot, identification of figurative language, and assessment of writing style. A variety of literature types should be available from which committees may select reading materials, such as poetry, classics, folktales, fables, or myths. Following discussion of the book, involved students in the literature circle need to experience learning activities to indicate what has been learned. Multiple intelligences theory can be used to respect each student's specific talents. Journals can be used to record ideas gleaned in reading. Several ways to extend students' experiences from reading the chosen library books include developing a reader's theater presentation; engaging in an activity such as pantomiming or creative dramatics; and making models or objects to clarify meanings of selected, relevant concepts read. Learning circles give students a chance to meet up with their personal learning styles. Ten questions illustrate emphasizing literature circles procedures of reading instruction. (NKA)

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Literacy and Literature Circles.

by Marlow Ediger

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LITERACY AND LITERATURE CIRCLES

literature circles and their use help to vary the kinds of activities used in literacy instruction. Pupils do like a change in the kinds of tasks being pursued in the curriculum. They do tend to find it to be a motivator to participate with others in a group endeavor. Respect for the thinking of each pupil is important when literature circles are being emphasized. Here, peers may read and discuss an interesting literary selection. Questions raised and discussed indepth make for higher levels of cognition. Purpose for active participation in the ongoing reading experience assists pupils to achieve more optimally. Reasons are then involved for gaining proficiency in skills and knowledge. A good reader needs to become proficient in using phonics, syllabication skills, as well as context clues, to unlock unknown words. Individual differences among learners need to be accepted within the framework of literature circles.

Challenge and Literature Circles

Literature circles generally involve four or five pupils who are actively engaged in cooperative learning. Learners here choose a library book to read based on interest factors. Interest in reading assists pupils to feel challenge in literary endeavors. The literature curriculum and the learner then become one, not separate entities.

There are selected standards which need adherence when pupils participate in literature circles. These include

* polite acknowledgment for the thinking of others
* acceptance of each other as a community of learners
* positive interaction among circle members
* intensity rather than survey learning
* full participation with no one dominating the discussion
* each participant staying on the topic being discussed

(Ediger, 1980, 94- 96).

The same titled paperback might be discussed by participants in the literature circle. Alternative suggestions for literature circles may include choosing a library book of a similar topic but written on different levels of complexity, selecting a library book written by the same author but of a different title, or attempting to harmonize library books read whereby each literature circle member makes a free choice selection to read.

One literature circle member may be chosen by the teacher

to lead the discussion or leadership may emerge in the ongoing discussion within the group with no designated chair person. Questions and problems for discussion may be chosen within the circle. These may be listed to implement sequentially. The following are suggested in a narrative selection for pupil discussion:

* type or kind of major character and how he/she influenced the story outcomes
* the geographical setting of the story and how it affected the major character in the literary selection.
* the theme and its clarity throughout the story.
* the plot of the story and how it was influenced by the major character as well as the story setting.
* clear identification of irony in the story, if in evidence.
* pace of sequence of events presented by the author.
* assessment of writing style by the author.
* open ended discussions whereby pupils individually identify additional problems and questions (Ediger, 1985,74- 80).

A variety of kinds of literature need to be available from which committees may select to read. A compiled list of poems may be chosen by members of a literature circle. Diverse poems should be include such as rhymed verse, poems based on syllabication (haiku and tanka), free verse, and acrostic poetry, among others. A literature circle may wish to read a book of folklore selections on tall tales, fairy tales, legends, myths, and fables. Or, classical writings which have stood the test of time and have survived in importance do capture the interests of selected pupils. Thus, the writings of Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allen Poe have captured the interests of literature circles members. Literary selections here are available to capture and maintain pupil interest in reading of different achievement levels (Ediger, and Rao, 2000, Chapter One).

Following the discussion of the library book or topic, involved pupils in the literature circle need to experience learning activities to reveal learnings obtained. Multiple intelligences theory has much to offer how pupils are to indicate what has been learned and yet each pupil's talents may be respected. A pupil in the literature circle may then show that which has been learned by one or more of the following intelligences:

* verbal intelligence. Here the pupil may use a written activity such as writing a poem, a summary, or portray a different character than that presented in the story.

* mathematical such as logical reasoning. With logic being emphasized, the pupil may indicate where logical thinking is/is not in evidence within the story discussed.
* musical/rhythmical. The pupil who is talented in music may write lyrics and attempt to put them into a developmental musical score.
* intrapersonal. The learner can show best what has been achieved on an individual basis. The talents here are to achieve optimally by the self.
* interpersonal whereby involved pupils indicate their talents best through collaborative endeavors.
* bodily/kinesthetic in which abilities are revealed best through physical prowess. Manual dexterity becomes important here with hands on learning as well as eye hand coordination activities.
* scientific with its emphasis on the curriculum area of science, but stress placed also upon objective thinking (See Gardner, 1993).

Journal writing might also become an important facet of literature circle members. Here, pupils may record ideas which are related such as when comparing the ideas from two different library book titles written by the same author(s). Content perceived as being related is remembered better as compared to being unrelated. Additional items for journal writing might well include new words encountered, novel use of language, major concepts read and discussed, and a summary of main ideas in the library book selection. Journal writing entries may be discussed and clarified within the literature circle membership.

Additional questions should be raised by learners, toward the end of the daily discussion, covering content in the library book read. These questions may involve

* meanings of creatively used contextual words or passages.
* "what if" kinds of questions.
* novel interpretations of content read.
* interpretations of metaphors, similes, clichés, and alliteration.
* feelings of pupils pertaining to an incident or character in the library book read (See Ediger, 1998), 149- 154).

Pupils in a literature circle need to evaluate the style of writing involved in the literary selection chosen for reading purposes. Gunning (2000) offers the following questions which may be raised and answered by involved learners pertaining to

reading a literary selection:

What are some especially well written passages?
What are some examples of colorful words that the author uses?
Does the author use figures of speech or images? If so, give some examples.
What special writing techniques does the author use? Give some examples.
Does this story remind you of any other stories that you have read? If so, which one(s)? In what ways are they similar?
Would you like to read another book by this same author or about the same subject? Why or why not?
Would you recommend this book to a friend? Why or Why not?
If you could, would you make changes to this book? Why or why not? Give some changes you would make.
Do think this book would make a good movie or a good television show? Why or why not?

Extending Learnings

There are a plethora of ways which may be used to extend pupil experiences from reading the chosen library book)s). These include the following:

* developing a reader's theater presentation, if the library book read lends itself to this experience.
* engaging in a dramatic activity such as pantomiming, formal or creative dramatics, covering content read.
* making models or objects to clarify meanings of selected, relevant concepts read.

When pupils extend learnings from literature circle learnings, increased indepth study is in evidence. With depth study pupils analyze content read. To analyze means to separate subject matter into component parts for critical thinking to occur. Separating fact from fantasy as well as accurate from inaccurate information needs depth discussion. Creative thinking needs to be used to synthesize the previously discussed parts. A whole should result from the involved parts. Assessment of the value or worth of the literary selection must also be made. Assessment here further emphasizes indepth learning since a reexamination of constructed ideas by learners in the literature circle is taking place. The assessment may include relating the literary selection read to the pupil's own personal experiences in

life (Ediger, 1993, 17- 20).

To increasingly optimize learnings in a literature circle approach, learning styes theory may have much to offer. Searson and Dunn (2001), from their research, have come up with unique suggestions to increase pupil achievement which include the following:

* acceptable noise levels, temperature readings, and informal versus formal setting arrangements
* emotional elements such as conformity versus nonconformity, as well as preferences for structure versus choice in terms of what to learn
* sociological factors such as studying alone versus with others, as well as collegial versus a more authoritarian teacher
* physiological elements such as auditory, tactual, and/or kinesthetic ways of learning. Included too are moving around or sitting still as well as eating versus noneating while concentrating on the task involved.

Literature circles offer opportunities to vary the kinds of learning opportunities provided for pupils. It does give a chance for pupils to meet up with their personal learning styles and thus optimize achievement and progress in literary activities.

The School Administrator and the Reading Curriculum

Principals of schools can provide valuable leadership in improving the reading curriculum. They need to support innovations in reading instruction, based on sound educational thinking and research. Ediger (2002, pp 18 and 19) wrote the following:

A vital asset in improving the reading curriculum is the involved school administrator. These leaders need to take a guiding role in the teaching of reading. School administrators, especially the principal of the school, can have considerable influence in teaching and learning situations. The direction of school leadership needs to be based on knowledge, research, and recommended methods of instruction. Quality teaching methodology needs to be used in classrooms so that each learner may achieve as optimally as possible. Which might be possible areas of study for school principals to become involved in the teaching of reading?

1. How should technology be used to improve reading instruction?
2. How may reading problems be diagnosed and remedied?

3. How might learning styles theory be used to optimize achievement in reading?

4. How might multiple intelligences theory be brought into the evaluation process of pupil reading achievement?

5. How can caring students be developed in the midst of high stakes testing?

6. How might teachers assist students to think critically and creatively as well as to solve relevant problems?

7. How might teachers and school principals form a community of learners?

8. How should a community of learners operate to implement those ideas deemed vital for school success?

9. How could decision making prowess be extended to involve teachers in the school setting?

10. How might teachers be encouraged to implement principles of learning from educational psychology in teaching reading?

Each of the above named ten questions might well refer to emphasizing literature circles procedures of reading instruction. Diverse methods need to be found to assist pupils to do as well as possible in reading literature from a variety of genres and levels of reading instruction.

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